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SENATE

REPORT
101-314

WEATHER BALLOON LAUNCH SITE
ACT-OF 1990

Mr. HOLLINGS, from the Committee on Commerce, Science,
and Transportation, submitted the following

R E P O R T

OF THE

SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE,
SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION

ON

S. 2181



JUNE 7 (legislative day, APRIL 18), 1990.—Ordered to be printed

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WEATHER BALLOON LAUNCH SITE ACT OF 1990

JUNE 7 (legislative day, APRIL 18), 1990.—Ordered to be printed

Mr. HOLLINGS, from the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, submitted the following

REPORT

[To accompany S. 2181]

The Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, to which was referred the bill (S. 2181) to authorize the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to purchase approximately 8 acres of land at the Fort Sumner Municipal Airport, De Baca County, New Mexico, having considered the same, reports favorably thereon and recommends that the bill do pass.

PURPOSE OF THE BILL

The purpose of the bill is to authorize the Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to purchase approximately 8 acres of land at the Ft. Sumner Municipal Airport in New Mexico to be used as a weather and scientific balloon launching facility. The bill directs the Administrator to use fiscal year 1990 funds appropriated under the Construction of Facilities account.

BACKGROUND AND NEEDS

The NASA Balloon Program conducts approximately 35 launches each year of scientific experiments weighing from 100 to 6,000 pounds. Flights are conducted typically at altitudes ranging from 110,000 to 130,000 feet for durations of up to 48 hours. Since 1976, some 575 scientific balloon flights have been conducted. The primary launch site historically has been at the National Scientific Balloon Facility (NSBF) located in Palestine, TX, where 60 percent of the launches have occurred. Use of alternate sites, both foreign and domestic, has been driven by specific scientific requirements.

In 1985, NASA identified a significant safety risk associated with balloon flights launched at NSBF and traversing to the east. The level of risk was due primarily to balloon failures occurring in areas of moderate population density around Palestine, TX. Planned balloon impacts, particularly in areas more densely populated to the east, also posed a significant safety risk. In some cases, balloon operations were restricted to maintain an acceptable level of risk.

To alleviate this problem, and to maintain flexibility in scientific balloon launches, NASA conducted a survey in 1986 to identify an alternate semi-permanent western launching site. Ft. Sumner, NM was selected, and the first balloon launch from that site was conducted in March 1987.

In 1988, because of increasing population levels around and to the east of Palestine, TX, NASA revisited the safety of continuing easterly launches from the NSBF. NASA concluded that the risk associated with any flights from the NSBF to the east was unacceptable, and all further flights (except those traversing to the west) were cancelled. NASA subsequently adopted a new operational approach for the Balloon Program which called for continued use of NSBF at Palestine, TX, as the principal center for scientific ballooning and as a launch site for westerly flights, but the establishment of a permanent alternate U.S. launch site to meet easterly and turnaround flight requirements. In December 1988, after a survey of thirty candidate sites in three Southwestern States, NASA selected Ft. Sumner, NM, to serve as the permanent site.

To date, there have been 21 balloon launches from the airport at Ft. Sumner, with NASA and science groups operating out of a leased hangar. However, the commitment to NASA for use of this facility expires in 1990. NASA therefore has identified the need for a new facility to be located at the Ft. Sumner airport. If an alternate launch site is not established, NASA has stated that it believes approximately half of the domestic balloon launch capability would be lost.

The estimated cost of land acquisition and facility construction at the Ft. Sumner airport is \$500,000. NASA has not requested additional funds specifically for this project. Rather, it intends to use funds appropriated in FY 1990 for its Construction of Facilities account. This legislation will provide the authority for NASA to use those FY 1990 funds for this project.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY

S. 2181 was introduced on February 27, 1990, by Senator Bingaman, with Senator Domenici as a cosponsor, and was referred to the Committee. No hearings have been held on the bill. Similar legislation (H.R. 4217) has been introduced by Representative Schiff and is pending before the House of Representatives.

On May 22, 1990, the Committee met in open executive session to consider S. 2181. The Committee, without objection, ordered the bill reported.

ESTIMATED COSTS

In accordance with paragraph 11(a) of rule XXVI of the Standing Rules of the Senate and section 403 of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974, the Committee provides the following cost estimate, prepared by the Congressional Budget Office:

U.S. CONGRESS,
CONGRESSIONAL BUDGET OFFICE,
Washington, DC, May 24, 1990.

Hon. ERNEST F. HOLLINGS,
*Chairman, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation,
U.S. Senate, Washington, DC.*

DEAR MR. CHAIRMAN: The Congressional Budget Office has reviewed S. 2181, the Weather Balloon Launch Site Act of 1990, as ordered reported by the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, May 22, 1990.

S. 2181 would, if enacted, authorize the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to purchase approximately eight acres of land in Fort Sumner, New Mexico for a weather balloon launch site; the land is currently owned by the town of Fort Sumner. Based on information provided by NASA, CBO estimates that the purchase price of this land would be about \$10,000, which would be paid out of NASA's 1990 appropriation for construction of facilities. NASA is currently leasing this land.

Aside from the payment for the purchase of the land, this bill would not affect the budget of any state or local government.

If you wish further details on this estimate, we will be pleased to provide them. The CBO staff contact is Michael Sieverts, who can be reached at 226-2860.

Sincerely,

ROBERT D. REISCHAUER,
Director.

REGULATORY IMPACT STATEMENT

In accordance with paragraph 11(b) of rule XXVI of the Standing Rules of the Senate, the Committee provides the following evaluation of the regulatory impact of the legislation, as reported.

S. 2181 authorizes the NASA Administrator to use existing funds to purchase approximately 8 acres of land at the Ft. Sumner Municipal Airport in New Mexico to be used as a weather and scientific balloon launching facility. Other than those involved over the relatively short-term in the construction of the new facility at the Ft. Sumner Municipal Airport, the number of people affected by this legislation should not exceed those currently engaged in balloon launching activities. Because no additional funds will be appropriated for this facility, S. 2181 is not expected to have any additional effect on the Nation's economy. The bill will not have any adverse effect on the personal privacy of any individual, nor will it result in any additional paperwork requirements.

SECTION-BY-SECTION ANALYSIS

Section 1.—Short Title

Section 1 states that the short title of the bill is the "Weather Balloon Launch Site Act of 1990".

Section 2.—Purchases of Land for Balloon Launching Facility

Section 2 authorizes the Administrator of NASA to purchase approximately 8 acres of land within Section 16, Township 3 North, Range 26 East, N.M.P.M., De Baca County, NM, to use as a balloon launching facility. The bill authorizes the use of funds appropriated for FY 1990 from the Construction of Facilities appropriation account.

CHANGES IN EXISTING LAW

In compliance with paragraph 12 of rule XXVI of the Standing Rules of the Senate, the Committee states that the bill as reported would make no change to existing law.

